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Leaving or staying in teaching: A ‘vignette’ of an experienced urban teacher ‘leaver’ of a London primary school

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Abstract

In the field of teacher attrition, there is a significant body of literature on why teachers leave high-needs urban schools and particularly why beginning teachers leave their schools and the profession. However, there is little research on the reasons why experienced teachers leave the teaching profession after having dedicated much of their career to the classroom. This paper examines this subject by considering whether teachers experience an ‘identity crisis’ in their careers which prompts them to leave. Drawing on identity theory, data from a single case study of an experienced urban teacher is taken from a wider qualitative research study carried out in London, England. The case is made that decisions to leave or stay in a school are contingent on a number of personal, professional and situational factors related to the teacher’s identity. The article concludes that one way to understand why long-serving teachers leave the profession is to examine aspects of their teacher identity and explore how a crisis in professional identity can contribute towards teacher attrition. In the light of this alternative approach towards understanding attrition, at the very least, supportive structures can be put in place to encourage more teachers to stay and contribute to the success and wellbeing of children from disadvantaged backgrounds

Key words: personal identity and professional identity, identity crisis, experienced urban teacher, long-serving teacher

Introduction

In recent times, the recruitment and retention of teachers in many parts of the UK has reached crisis point. The UK government statistics indicate nearly a third of teachers who joined the profession in 2010 had left teaching within five years (DfE, 2016). Teacher turnover rates are particularly high in those schools serving the most deprived communities, such as in London where recruiting and retaining teachers in London’s challenging schools has always been problematic not least due to the high costs of living in the city (Lupton & Sullivan, 2007). Over the years, many studies have examined the reasons why teachers leave their schools and

the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Jacob, 2007; Smithers and Robinson, 2005). More recently in the UK, a number of teaching union surveys as well as media reports have explored the reasons why teachers are currently leaving the profession in high numbers (i.e., *The Guardian*, January 2015; NASUWT [National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, 2016], NUT [National Union of Teachers, 2016]). Indeed studies on teacher attrition in the UK have detailed a set of factors that have precipitated this action and these include concerns about high work-load, discipline problems, large class sizes and low morale (NAO [National Audit Office], 2016). There are, however, further possible reasons which experienced and long-serving teachers have for leaving their challenging schools; these teachers may face a form of professional identity ‘crisis’. This article presents a case study in the form of a detailed ‘vignette’ of one experienced urban teacher, Liz. The vignette explores Liz’s personal and professional identities to illuminate the reasons why she decided to leave the school and the teaching profession after 10 years of teaching.

Teacher Shortages - a complicated story

For some time now, concerns have been expressed about the recruitment and, in particular, the retention of teachers in many parts of the UK (Wilshaw, 2015; National Union of Teachers, 2016). A rise in the birth rate, currently affecting primary schools, is not being adequately matched by the number of new recruits to the profession and this is a demographic challenge that will also impact secondary schools. There are also concerns over the numbers of qualified teachers who report that they are considering leaving the profession in the next two years (Lynch et al., 2016). A survey commissioned in 2015 by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the largest teacher union in the UK, reported that just over half of those teachers surveyed planned to quit the profession in the following two years. The top two reasons given were ‘volume of workload’ and ‘seeking a better work/life balance’

(YouGov and NUT, 2015). The schools minister for the UK, Nick Gibb, confirmed in late 2016 that 30% of the 21,400 teachers who began teaching in 2010 had left the profession by 2015 (Weale, 2016). Certainly a wide swathe of indicators show that teacher shortages are on the rise (NAO, 2016). Yet obtaining an accurate and complete picture of teacher recruitment and retention rates in the UK is difficult. This is in part because there is a wide array of (often contradictory) data sources which make it challenging to chart exactly what is happening (Lynch et al., 2016). In his annual report (Ofsted, 2016, p.125), Sir Michael Wilshaw, who at the time was England's Chief Inspector of Schools, noted that a lack of accurate government statistics meant that it was 'difficult to understand accurately the extent to which shortages exist at a local level, or the number of teachers moving abroad or between the independent and state sectors'.

The most recent figures on the school workforce in England show that teacher retention rates reduce after each year of qualifying. After five years, 70% of qualified teachers remain in their posts, after ten years this falls to 61% and 50% of teachers remain in service 19 years after qualifying and entering the profession (DfE, 2016). Thus, it seems that teachers leave at a higher rate in their first five years of teaching. One conclusion to draw from these figures is that the longer teachers remain in the teaching profession, the more likely they are to stay. However, attrition rates have increased over the past five years in both primary and secondary schools where the numbers of those leaving are broadly similar across both phases of schooling (NAO, 2016). There are differences in attrition rates between teachers of different subject areas. For example, attrition rates for mathematics and science teachers are above average. There are also differences in teacher attrition numbers that correlate with school locality and intake. For instance, teacher attrition is higher in schools with higher rates of deprivation. Schools in inland disadvantaged areas have higher levels of attrition than

those in deprived coastal areas (DfE, 2016), while Inner and Outer London schools experience the highest rates of teacher attrition.

Successive UK governments have at various times attempted to tackle teacher retention in urban schools, by introducing a range of programmes and salary packages designed to attract and retain teachers. However, schools located in disadvantaged areas, particularly in London, experience significant problems recruiting and retaining teachers due to a number of reasons. These include schools that have a high proportion of children from complex backgrounds and that may be less attractive to potential recruits; disadvantaged schools in some areas that may have to compete for teachers against local independent and selective schools; and ultimately a pragmatic factor - the costs of living in the city can be prohibitive for many teachers (Rice, 2015; Howson, 2016). Housing, transport and childcare costs are higher in London than elsewhere in the UK and this makes it much less affordable for many public sector workers such as teachers (Skapinker, 2015; Trust for London, 2015). For example, a survey undertaken by the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT, 2015) of over two thousand schools in England and Wales, found that 63% of schools in inner London reported that their recruitment problems were 'because of high housing and living costs' (p. 4). Although London teachers are compensated in part by an additional payment called the 'London weighting' allowance, this does not bridge the additional costs of living in London.

Why teachers leave teaching

A range of studies have examined the reasons why teachers leave the profession and many of these focus on the attrition rates of beginning teachers (Buchanan et al., 2013; Hong, 2012; Struyven and Vanthournout, 2014). Individual and contextual factors are often cited as reasons for why beginning teachers decide to leave, such as burnout, inability to cope with

heavy workloads, challenging student behaviour and weak leadership and management structures in schools (Schaefer, Long & Clandinin, 2012). However, there are also wider policy pressures that impact on teacher retention. In the last decade or more, in the UK there has been an intensification of accountability measures in both primary and secondary schools including significant changes to the curriculum and assessment procedures. These reforms to schooling have prompted a steady stream of reports by teacher unions and the media that repeatedly suggest that teacher morale is low (i.e., NUT, 2016; NASUWT, 2016; *The Guardian*, April 2016). Such reports cite a burdensome workload, lack of work-life balance and unrealistic demands of teachers as well as what is perceived to be an increasing negative public perception of teachers. All these factors are reported by teachers who are contemplating, and who leave the profession.

Fewer studies explore why it is that longer-serving teachers decide to leave and there is a paucity of literature on experienced teachers in their mid or late career who decide to exit from teaching (Day & Gu, 2010). Certainly, teacher attrition rates decline the longer a teacher remains in their post, but research indicates that mid-career or long-serving teachers can sometimes experience a 'crossroads' or 'mid-life crises' in their professional lives (Day & Gu, 2010; Huberman, 1993). Although these crises do not affect all teachers in this professional career phase, nevertheless there is some evidence to show that teachers in the mid-to-late phase in their careers experience tensions and conflicts between their personal and professional lives which tests their sense of resilience (Day and Gu, 2010; Nias, 1989). Managing these tensions as well as changes in their roles (such as progressing to leadership positions) may have significant repercussions on their sense of identity; the kind of teacher they are and the kind of teacher they want to be in the future. Thus one way to understand

why experienced teachers leave the profession and why they may suffer a ‘mid-life crisis’ is to examine their reasons for leaving through the analytic lens of identity.

A growing body of research has started to deploy identity theory to explore and better understand teacher attrition rates (Day et al., 2006; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). Schaefer, Long and Clandinin (2012) argue that deploying identity theory as a theoretical lens can ‘offer insight into the life/career span of a teacher, with the temporal process of becoming a teacher as [being] linked with the processes of leaving teaching’ (p. 118). The argument is that while pressures like housing costs, high stakes testing and regular surveillance are experienced by many teachers, their identities play an influential part in their career decisions (including their motivations to teach and stay or leave the profession) and their overall sense of purpose and commitment to their work (Day et al., 2007; Schepens, Aelterman & Vlerick, 2009). As Bullough (1997, p.21) states, ‘teacher identity [... is] the basis for meaning making and decision making’ and their identities are made up of a combination of aspects from their personal and professional selves that are continually constructed and reconstructed in response to a variety of ever-changing influences.

A long-serving teacher who has sustained their commitment beyond 5 years has shown commitment and dedication to the profession and has successfully negotiated the ‘danger points’ to which many beginning teachers have succumbed, resulting in them leaving the profession. Indeed one argument put forward by Nias (1989) is that over time a teacher’s personal and professional identities merge to a greater or lesser extent so they feel ‘natural’ or ‘whole’ when engaging in their work (p.185). According to Nias, those teachers who stay have managed to reconcile aspects of their personal and professional identities and they negotiate the competing aspects of their identities (often with the help of colleagues, children,

family and friends) in order to sustain their commitment to their job. Thus it might be argued that longer serving teachers have a durable professional identity. While some researchers claim that teachers do construct intrinsically stable identities over time (Nias, 1989), other research claims that teachers' identities are essentially unstable (Cooper & Olson, 1996; MacLure, 1993). Day et al. (2006) argue that identities will be stable and unstable at various times in a teacher's career. Some teachers, may come to a point in their careers when they face a professional identity crisis. These crises can materialise as a result of a loss of motivation and commitment to the job, attempting to cope with significant work-life tensions and pressures, increasingly feeling alienated from the structures and practices of their schools, and feeling trapped (Day & Gu, 2010; MacLure, 1993). For example, MacLure's (1993) study of 69 primary and secondary teachers found that a subset of participants held what she termed 'spoiled' identities where they 'reported a deep sense of alienation from the values and practices of their institution'. In MacLure's study the most 'troubled' of these teachers were 'no longer able to reconcile their identities with the job' (p.317). Some of these teachers felt 'trapped' and they wanted to 'get out'. In cases like this, it would seem that a fundamental disjunction between what an individual teacher believes is the way a teacher should be and the way they are coerced to behave in practice can result in a damaged or changed identity. This identity damage may lead a long-serving teacher to leave the profession.

Fundamentally, understanding the reasons why teachers leave the profession is complex; understanding why experienced teachers decide to leave the profession is arguably even more complex. It is evident from what is already known about teacher attrition that structural and material pressures play a part in this process. So do the emotional and cultural pressures that teachers experience in performing their work in respect of accountability matters. However,

this paper examines one experienced teacher's sense of identity in order to begin to understand how a professional identity crisis may precipitate a decision to quit the profession.

Methods and Analysis

The data reported here is taken from a larger study into aspects of teacher retention in challenging London primary schools (Towers, 2017). This explores teacher retention from a different perspective than is common in the burgeoning literature in this area. As is evident from the statistical evidence, while a high proportion of teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years of service, many teachers decide to stay on beyond this point. Rather than concentrating on the decision to leave, it seemed that much could be learned about why teachers leave from the perspectives of those who decided to stay.

The larger study investigated the career decisions of primary school teachers working in challenging inner London schools where there were high levels of teacher turnover. A qualitative approach was chosen as it seemed an effective way to understand 'the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations' (Kvale, 1996, p.1). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 primary school teachers. A purposive sampling approach was taken to recruit the participants who were 'included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought' (Cohen et al, 2011, p.156). The teachers, or 'stayers', in the sample had to fulfil two criteria: they needed to have taught for 5 or more years, and they needed to have stayed for that length of time in the same disadvantaged school. The schools where the teachers worked also needed to fulfil certain criteria to fit the urban 'disadvantaged' description. These characteristics included schools which had: (1) high

numbers of children requiring Free School Meals – a proxy for low income families in the UK; (2) significant numbers of children on the Special Educational Needs (SEN) register; and (3) higher levels of children speaking English as an additional language as well in receipt of pupil premium funding (a measure for publicly funded schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and to close the gaps between them and their more advantaged peers).

The transcripts of the interviews underwent a process of axial coding, an inductive process where open codes were grouped into categories. Unsurprisingly a number of themes which emerged from the participants' voices related to the literature examined and the questions which had been asked. For example, the value which the participants placed on their relationships with the children as a reason to remain in their schools featured prominently. This echoes a wide range of studies on teacher motivation (for example: Frankenberg et al., 2010; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Stanford, 2001). Similarly, the importance of a collegial atmosphere in the participants' schools was a key reason many gave for staying in their posts. Most of the participants in the study expressed a firm commitment to stay in the future, but some 'unsettled' teachers voiced doubts about staying in the years to come. One discrepant case in the study was Liz who had taken the decision to leave her school after remaining there for 10 years. Liz had stayed for many of the same reasons as the other 'stayers' in the study, but her unique and unexpected account highlights other key factors involved in experienced teachers' decisions to leave the teaching profession. This paper draws on an in-depth interview with Liz who had crossed the threshold point of 5 years when many teachers in the UK leave the profession. Her narrative is presented in this paper in the form of a vignette.

The vignette is an illustrative story which provides a rounded and holistic picture of what is being explored and is a useful technique ‘for exploring people’s perceptions, beliefs and meanings about specific situations’ (Barter & Reynold, 1999, n.p.). Using vignettes to represent qualitative data can be a useful tool to bring what Ritchie et al. (2013) describe as a ‘degree of specificity to the discussion which can be valuable, helping to highlight the boundaries or contingencies of people’s beliefs and actions’ (p.166). The vignette of Liz highlights the connections and patterns in the data in a more coherent and meaningful way through the use of story-telling. However, one dilemma has to be concerned with what can and cannot be claimed from one interview even if methodological issues have been carefully attended to (Hammersley, 2003). Oakley (1997) has argued that small samples are of limited value although Sikes (2000, p. 263) believes they can be useful in highlighting and valuing the ‘subjective, emic and ideographic’. In this article, the lens for this analysis is the personal and professional identity of one teacher and its impact on her decision to leave teaching. Our concern is not with generalisability; rather, it is to start to explore teacher attrition from the perspective of an experienced urban ‘leaver’.

Deciding to stay- wanting to leave: Liz’ story

Liz taught for almost ten years at Beaumont Primary School, an inner London school set in a socially and economically deprived neighbourhood. When Liz was interviewed she had just left the teaching profession and had moved with her young family out of London. Her motivations for wanting to become a primary teacher had included the desire to work with young children and ‘make a difference’. However, initially she also had pragmatic reasons for choosing to be a teacher including the flexibility it offered her to travel if she wanted.

Once she started teaching at Beaumont Primary, Liz explained that she decided to stay there for two main reasons: the children she taught and her friendships with staff. She said:

You care about the children [...] you make relationships with them.

One year group I taught three times, so you build a rapport with them and that was a good reason why I didn't leave... you just want them to do so well, don't you?

Primary school teaching is unique. A primary school teacher spends all day every day with the same class of thirty children. Inevitably teachers and students can develop close bonds (Hunter-Quartz et al., 2010). In the first seven years of her career at Beaumont, Liz taught the same class of children three times as they grew up and went through the school. She had a close attachment to the school and its family of children. In her interview, Liz communicated a clear sense of social responsibility for the children, whom she felt, had to face too many challenges in their young lives: 'you have this responsibility for those children. Many of them have hard lives [...] if they don't have those building blocks, then they will find it hard to achieve'. Unsurprisingly, a theme of 'care' emerged strongly in Liz's narrative. She highlighted her concern to ensure that every day of the school week was focused on helping the children be and feel successful. She explained: 'I always felt, I've got to make these children improve' and added, 'you're always pushing yourself forward'. Indeed, Liz talked a lot about wanting the children to 'do well' and talked about the time she would devote to making sure the needs of each child were met.

Like the other participants in the larger study from which this vignette is constructed (Towers, 2017), Liz discussed how the children she taught elicited caring and nurturing aspects of her identity (O'Connor, 2008; Vogt, 2002). She explained:

I was very protective about certain children – they had a quality which you had to nurture. Almost as if they were your own children. And you wanted to make sure that they could reach their potential.

Liz's experiences in Beaumont, working with children who experienced complex social lives, had powerfully influenced her identity as a caring and nurturing teacher who strived to achieve the best for the children in her class. What was also clear in Liz's interview, was the extent to which her own biography and educational experiences impacted the type of teacher she was and the type of teacher she wanted to be. She talked about her own happy days at primary school:

I have very, very happy memories of my primary school days. At that point in my life I loved school, at that point I really loved school. I have fond memories of primary school, so maybe that's why I went into primary teaching. That was my happiest time.

As Olsen (2014, p.85) asserts:

The teacher relies on her past (consciously or not) to interpret the present, and folds together various personal and professional aspects of her lived experience as she makes sense of a particular situation in which she finds herself.

As has already been noted, Liz stayed on as a teacher after her first five years; the point at which a significant number of teachers leave their inner London primary schools (Allen et al., 2012). Those initial five years were a challenge for Liz and she talked about the extreme behavioural difficulties she encountered with the children she taught but with whom she persevered. Certainly, by the time she had decided to leave, her passion for teaching and concern for the children remained as strong as when she started her career. However, the increasing pressure of the workload as well as the pressure to achieve (what she saw as often unrealistic) results from the children began to take its toll. She talked about the stress of ‘target setting all the time, with pressure from management, also from the government, you feel pressure’. However, the pressure of ever increasing accountability measures became a crucial game changer for Liz in her teaching career and challenged her professional identity in ways that became unmanageable for her.

Many participants in the wider study (Towers, 2017) and in the published research on teacher attrition (i.e., Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014; Troman, 2008) refer to the pressure and stress of having to achieve results quickly and the intensification of a continuous and expanding stream of bureaucratic demands and expectations. During the course of the interview, Liz’s language became more negative. Liz used the word ‘stress’, ‘stressful’ or ‘stressed’ to describe herself 13 times throughout the interview. Although the discourse of stress is often employed to refer to a range of emotional situations, with some more negative than others, it is also frequently used to describe the teaching experience, particularly in challenging urban schools (Wilhelm et al., 2000). One key explanation of how the stresses of the job resulted in Liz leaving the profession can be found in the crisis that she experienced in relation to her professional identity. Similar to MacLure’s (1993) findings, Liz talked about her feelings of

alienation from the 'values and practices' that had crept into her school and she was struggling to reconcile her teacher identity with her job. She still enjoyed teaching up until the very end of her time at Beaumont, as she explained: 'I mean obviously I was passionate about teaching – I enjoyed it'. What shifted was the way in which she managed the changing demands and how she reconstructed her teacher identity. In the early years of her career, she was able to 'switch off' more easily from school. Over time and with more experience, she had developed a concern about heightened accountability measures and her inability to switch off from her work. She said that these aspects of her work made her feel very vulnerable and affected her confidence. She explained:

You were constantly judged [...] I don't know of any other profession that is so scrutinised as teaching. You're being judged on so many levels. I mean basically, you're held accountable for every single child. If a child is not performing, then it's your fault. It's not that maybe that child needs special help, it's 'what is it about your teaching that isn't helping that child reach the next stage?' Basically it's personal. It's your fault.

Accountability measures appeared to drill into Liz's identity as a teacher, making her question her sense of self and challenging her commitment to her job in the school. As Day (2002) argues, the performativity agenda can serve to threaten a teacher's 'sense of agency' as well as 'challenge teachers' substantive identities' (p.686). More experienced teachers like Liz may have a more heightened awareness of the significance of high stakes testing. They are more likely to carry leadership responsibilities for raising attainment and thus, carry much of the emotional load of trying to do well in national tests. If beliefs about what constitutes

‘best practice’ and what has to be done to assure compliance and test success come into conflict, this experience may precipitate a form of identity crisis. If this conflict persists over time, then it may be that experienced teachers like Liz have to withdraw to survive. Certainly accountability pressures diminished Liz’s ‘sense of motivation, efficacy and job satisfaction’ (p.686).

Those teachers in the larger study (Towers, 2017) who stayed in their schools were able to manage the pressures of accountability and they found ways of protecting themselves from the worst excesses of bureaucratic demands. However, Liz found this challenge harder to negotiate. There may be several reasons for this: first as an experienced teacher, Liz had pedagogical beliefs about how and what children should learn, but her values and strategies did not always fit with the shifts in expectations from a prescribed reformed primary curriculum. As a result, she felt she had less autonomy or control over her work, something which, according to Hunter-Quartz et al. (2010) claim is vitally important for a teacher to maintain if they are to stay in teaching. Second, Liz was a teacher in the final year of an English primary school for a number of years. At this point, children are required to undertake National Curriculum tests at the end of the academic year. These tests known as SATS (Standard Attainment Tests) are a high stakes test for both the children and the school (Troman, 2008). The results of these tests are used by the Department of Education and Local Authorities (school boards) to rank schools regionally and nationally and are also used to identify struggling schools. Thus, Liz routinely shouldered the school’s expectations.

It may be that her necessary investment in the children’s academic attainment to prescribed levels was such that any indication that they were not achieving as they should (according to levels and test scores) became particularly demoralising for her. Perhaps for

Liz, who had become inevitably immersed in the accountability culture in her school, achieving good tests scores had become internalised as a measure of how successful she was as a teacher. From what she said, her school and senior leadership team relied on Liz to deliver good test results. Liz was clear, however, that she enjoyed working with her colleagues and also found the middle managers in her school supportive and encouraging. However, although Liz did not explicitly identify the school's most senior leaders as a reason for her decision to leave teaching, this was implicit in her comments about the level of judgement she received, such as when she explained: 'You were constantly judged, your work scrutinised, always being judged'. In primary schools such as the one where Liz taught, it is more likely that a proven and experienced teacher like Liz is expected to work with the children who are preparing for national tests. Thus, it can be argued that as part of Liz's professional identity she took on the pressures of accountability.

For a teacher like Liz, who, by her own admission, always 'strived for perfection' and wanted the best for every child in her class, where 'no child could hide away', the increasing performativity agenda appeared to threaten her sense of self, negating the values she held dear. There was a constant pressure to perform (Ball, 2003). Indeed, Liz reported that in pupil review meetings with members of the school's senior leaders, she believed that she had been held accountable for failing some of the children in her care who had not attained the scores that the school management had wanted to see. This was a demoralising experience for her, given that she had been working so hard sometimes at great costs to her own children and her family. Liz talked about the impact of all this; 'my health became quite poor because of stress'. She explained:

I think I wasn't enjoying (teaching) in the same way that I had before. I still really liked the teaching and the children. But it was the *other* elements I didn't enjoy. The marking [grading] I had to do until midnight ... it was just that relentless nature of it I think, impacting on your home life, not having any free time, not being able to switch off ... you know the whole work-life battle. On a Sunday night, not being able to sleep.

According to Nias (1987, p.180), some teachers 'consciously or unconsciously reduce the boundaries between their occupational and other lives'. Nias adds that for these teachers, teaching absorbs much of their time and energy, including those aspects of themselves and their lives which might otherwise be reserved for non-work related activities. As such Nias (1987) argues teaching 'allows little space for the development of alternative lives' (p.180). In Liz's case, from what she said, her job started to threaten her sense of self perhaps because she *over* identified with being a teacher. It was as if one aspect of her identity was swallowing up the other.

I identified myself as a teacher, it became my crutch I suppose – being a teacher was the identity I held on to. So those other elements of my identity, who I was, and the other things I enjoyed doing were taking a back seat because I wasn't doing anything else apart from working. So in a way being a teacher was my crutch, that's how I would define myself. As a teacher. Before then, being a teacher was just my job, but then it became everything.

She added:

I think as time went on, the two, the 'teacher' Liz and the 'home life' Liz began to merge. And that was part of the stress because those two had become intertwined really. I think there was that conflict there.

In Liz's case, the merging of her personal and professional identities was not harmonious; it resulted in 'conflict'. Nias (1989, p.191) describes being a teacher as 'to feel whole while being pulled apart'. However, Liz no longer felt she had a 'home life' distinct from her teacher 'work life' and it would appear she no longer felt 'whole' but rather she was 'being pulled apart'. According to Troman (2008), it is because of many teachers' 'strong professional and vocational commitment' to their work, that they can sometimes fail 'to juggle' the personal with the professional and with this failure [comes] an identity crisis' (p. 631). In the case of Liz, she appeared to suffer a crisis in confidence and became overwhelmed with the pressures to continually achieve good test results, all of which encroached on her personal family life and affected her sense of enjoyment and fulfilment in her professional life. This professional identity crisis may provide a crucial explanation why some teachers feel they can no longer stay in their schools and may eventually exit teaching altogether. Huberman (1993) argues that while a teacher may encounter many challenging times in their career, 'there are periods of greater vulnerability' (p.353). If Liz had been given the opportunity to critically reflect on her working life and teacher identity with supportive school leaders, she may have been able to head off this crisis. For Liz, after nearly a decade of successful teaching in a high needs, inner city primary school, she left the school and the profession.

Discussion

What is evident from the vignette in this paper is that a teacher's decision to leave the profession may not be straightforward or clear-cut. It may not simply be a reaction to well established factors in attrition such as challenging behaviour in the classroom or low morale, although these clearly do play a part in the decisions to leave for teachers with five or less years of experience. In contrast, leaving (as in Liz's case) can take a number of years and can be a 'drawn-out process' (Gallant & Riley, 2014, p. 575). Liz left teaching in what Day and Gu (2007; 2010) refer to as the middle years (8 – 15 years) of a teacher's professional life phase. In their research, Day and Gu (2007) found that teachers in this phase of teaching are characterised either by engagement and increased motivation or by a sense of detachment and loss of motivation. For Liz, the latter appeared to be the case as she was 'struggling to manage increasingly complex personal, professional and situated (workplace) scenarios' (Day & Gu, 2007, p.436). As her expertise and experience increased, she was asked to take on perhaps the most challenging cohort to work with - children due to take their high-stakes, nationally mandated examinations. As she had matured, she had established herself in a relationship with her partner and had a young family to care for. Her professional and private lives were filled with commitments, responsibilities and great pressure on her time. Working in an extremely challenging and demanding school, with a high turnover of teachers, and where attainment was not always as 'good' as was predicted, is a challenge to all teachers. For those who carry additional and equally high-stakes responsibilities in their private lives, the pressures can be enormous.

From her narrative, in the final three years of her career, a number of factors contributed towards Liz's decision to leave: the pressure of accountability which resulted in a lack of autonomy and control in her work; and an increasingly burdensome workload resulting in a

lack of work-life balance and a perceived lack of support from leadership. All of these factors were inextricably linked to Liz's sense of identity as a teacher. This is in part because Liz had begun to define herself in terms of being a capable teacher who could manage well in the current testing regime. As Kelchtermans (2005, p.999) argues 'standards and tests promise [...] final proof of one's "quality" as a teacher - even if it is a delusive certainty, that demands a very reductionist understanding (and experiencing) of the educational relationship'. Liz's sense of self-efficacy had started to diminish as she struggled to fulfil all her tasks to a high standard, and all within the context of a challenging urban school. She had begun to feel a sense of vulnerability in her job. As Kelchtermans (2005, p.997) also recognises, the experience of vulnerability is 'mediated by the context (policy environment, social and cultural climate in school etc.) and is directly linked to teachers' identity'. Liz believed that she was not being recognised for the great efforts she was making and this contributed to a 'spoiling' of her teacher identity (MacLure, 1993). For Liz this meant that teaching had finally 'consumed' her totally; this was not a harmonious merging of personal and professional identities which made Liz feel 'whole' (Nias, 1989) and which energised her in her work. Instead the demands on her time and capacity to live a healthy professional and personal life became too much for her.

At a time when accountability pressures on schools and teachers are mounting, recent statistics show that workload pressures induced by increased demands for accountability and performance have contributed to a rise in teacher attrition in England (NAO, 2016). The pressure to raise and maintain standards as well as the pressure to respond to growing levels of accountability, all within a challenging disadvantaged urban context, unsurprisingly takes its toll on all teachers' emotional wellbeing which impacts their sense of identity (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). For Liz, this was evident in the pressure to achieve good test results for the

children in her class. Having to respond to certain accountability measures can run counter to a teacher's sense of values and beliefs about the work they do in schools (Flores & Day, 2006). Consequently, these pressures can impact the professionalism of teachers (Frostenson, 2015) and diminish a teacher's morale and sense of autonomy (Day et al., 2006). However, Liz was an experienced urban school teacher and had coped with these sorts of problems throughout her career. She had passed the five year milestone and only now was experiencing emotional difficulties and feeling she could no longer sustain the demands of the job.

Liz referred explicitly to the mounting workload that she had to contend with and spoke of how this negatively impacted on her work-life balance. Her response echoes studies that report workload pressures which impact work-life balance is a crucial factor in teachers' decisions to leave (i.e., Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2006; Barmby, 2007). Liz talked a lot about how her workload was 'stress-inducing' and affected her sense of professional and personal identity. Furthermore, her health deteriorated as a result of her inability to manage her workload. As Howard and Johnson (2004, p.401) say, 'in individual human terms, the costs of teacher stress can be huge and include impaired health, reduced self-confidence and self-esteem and damaged personal relationships'. In the case of Liz, the damage to her health and to her mental well-being, meant that she had to stop teaching. It could be that more experienced teachers in disadvantaged schools with higher than average staff attrition rates, may have to take an additional responsibility for providing continuity and care for the children at their school to make up for gaps in provision. It may be the case that this additional emotional and educational load proves to be a tipping point, which, if not recognised by leadership teams in the school, may effectively lead to the loss of experienced members of staff.

Indeed a key factor that encourages teachers to remain in their schools can be the fact that they hold a positive view of the leaders in their schools (Heinz, 2015; Smithers & Robinson, 2003). Although Liz did not explicitly refer to the leadership of her school as a reason for leaving, she did indicate that the senior leadership in the school placed pressure on her to achieve (often unrealistic) results. Unsupportive leadership structures create school cultures that do not allow teachers to flourish and these sorts of school cultures can have detrimental effects on teacher identities (Flores & Day, 2006). Headteachers who demonstrate ‘acts of care’ (Gu & Day, 2007, p.144) towards their teachers can profoundly influence a teacher’s sense of wellbeing and sense of belonging. However, while headteachers may be aware of the need for support for inexperienced teachers, from what Liz says it is evident that there may be a need to ensure that support is also available for more experienced expert teachers too.

Palmer’s (1997) argument that ‘unlike many professions, teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life’ (p.15) provides an insight into how fragile the relationship between personal and professional identities can be. Liz confessed that she was ‘desperate’ to leave teaching by the end and said, ‘I was really happy when I left and for about a year after I left I said I would never go back’. Liz’s vignette highlights a gap in the attrition accounts; Liz was an experienced teacher who stayed for a considerable period of time then left. In her interview she talked about the numerous reasons why she stayed for as long as she did and the sense of reward and enjoyment she experienced as a teacher. Liz started her career able to sustain the challenges of working in a challenging and deprived inner London school. She was driven by her commitment to the children she taught, she built positive relationships with parents and colleagues and received many emotional and intellectual rewards from teaching. What appeared to sustain Liz up to around the seventh year of her teaching career, was how she was able to manage different aspects of her teacher

identity – allowing time and space for personal growth and development and fulfilling the professional aspects of her life.

However, a key dimension to her increasing unease in her work was the blurring of the boundaries between her personal and professional identities which she found difficult to reconcile or harmonize. Instead the expectation to be a successful teacher and also maintain a healthy personal life became too much. Olsen (2014) argues that experience is only part of the process of teaching. A teacher with experience also needs to be given opportunities to understand and make sense of identity changes and conflicts during their teaching career, otherwise they may not remain in their jobs, particularly in difficult urban schools. When teachers are left to negotiate their own identity conflicts, Olsen (2014, p.90) warns that it can ‘lead to confusion and frustration, such that their professional growth is affected negatively and their desire to remain in the profession is undermined’ (p.90). Certainly, then, later on in their careers, teachers working in challenging and demanding schools need to have an understanding of how to shape and expand their teacher identity to meet the challenges and expectations they encounter, especially as these are likely to increase with the teachers’ growing experience. Liz perceived that she was not helped to manage her changing identities in this way, and it was perhaps a task too great for her to manage alone without the structures of a supportive school leadership.

This paper has highlighted the complex and multi-faceted nature of identity and has detailed how teachers can experience a crisis in their professional identity even when they are well established in their careers. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on how to *sustain* teachers throughout their teaching careers, rather than simply focus on retaining them in the first years. Through a focus on the changing identities of teachers over time, in a context of

awareness that even experienced teachers can undergo a crisis in their professional identities, it may be possible to pave a way forward to sustain experienced long-serving teachers.

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